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So You Want to Be a Flight Instructor?

Photo by Raymond G. Stinchcomb

How would you respond to a help wanted advertisement that stated, in part: "... applicant must be very responsible and of the highest integrity; must have effective communication skills; must be capable of human, mechanical, technical and meteorological analysis; must be adept in managing risk; a continuing education program is mandated; proficiency in working in cramped spaces is required? Work hours can be long. No guarantee of a climate-controlled work environment. Pay commensurate with experience. Benefits include: high respect from your clients; a lofty perch from which to view the world; travel to exciting places; and the knowledge that your job is the most important job of all those available in this field of endeavor."

Sound good? Well, I have just such a job. I am a full-time flight instructor. True, there are more lucrative ways of earning a living in aviation, but I assert that there is no other aviation endeavor that is as rewarding and satisfying as sharing the gift of flight by teaching others to be safe, knowledgeable, and proficient pilots. And those flight instructors who teach primary flight students undoubtedly play the most important role of anyone in aviation.

The reason that the primary flight instructor has this most critical position is because of the immutable law of primacy — the things we learn first are the things we retain — and also the hardest things to change. To this day, I remember my first flight lesson. It was pretty much a “kick the tires, light the fires” kind of experience, certainly not a great way to lay the first stones of the foundation. And even to this day, after many thousands of hours of flying, I have to consciously overcome some of the bad habits I acquired on that first flight. That’s why the primary flight instructor has the most important job of anyone in aviation, bar none.

Do You Have the Right Stuff?

With this point in mind, what qualities and attributes should be instilled, developed, nurtured, and embraced by those who teach flight, especially by those who will be teaching primary flight students? Here’s my list.

Responsibility is at the very top of the list. The flight instructor is the single most important element in creating safe pilots. The flight instructor bears responsibility for ensuring that clients embrace not only solid stick-and-rudder concepts and skills, but just as importantly the elements of risk management critical to being safe pilots. The flight instructor is the person who sets the stage for the rest of the entire flight career of each primary flight student.

That’s why the most important thing we need to instill in the minds, hearts, and souls of flight instructors is to ensure that they not only understand the critical responsibility they are being entrusted with, but also to make certain that they buy into that responsibility. They need to understand that even if they are only going to use the flight instructor certificate as a means of building hours so that they can move on to air carrier flying, they still have an immense responsibility during every hour logged in the right seat of a training airplane. It is no exaggeration to say that these hours matter enormously not only to their clients, but also to the future of general aviation.

Respect is next on my list, and it has three parts. First is respect for the responsibility that they have been entrusted with. Second is respect for their clients. Third is respect for themselves as instructors.

Respect for our responsibility is somewhat self-explanatory, but also addressed above as the first item on my list. Respect for clients includes a number of professional attitudes and behaviors, starting with the concept that we will always have a syllabus, lesson plan, or curriculum and that we ensure our clients are aware of it. We show respect by being punctual. We show it by communicating not in aviation jargon, but in language they can understand as novices.

Most beginning flight students don’t understand aviation-speak and, though they will learn it as they progress, respect means meeting them where they are when they arrive. Another important way to show respect is to adjust our teaching style to the way they best learn.

Another immutable rule — the rule of karma — comes into play regarding respect. As the saying goes, what goes around, comes around. If respect is shown for the responsibility one holds as a flight instructor, and if respect is shown to clients, it will come back one thousand fold to those who show it. You will quickly realize that being a flight instructor is a vocation that you can, and should be exceedingly proud to practice.

The flight instructor is the single most important element in creating safe pilots.



Photo by H. Dean Chamberlain

Integrity follows in the list of qualities crucial to being a flight instructor with the right stuff. It is integrity that dictates being honest when answering questions. That includes admitting when we don't know the answer, but promising to do research before the next meeting and deliver the answer then, without fail. It is integrity that dictates declining to provide training in aircraft or avionics unfamiliar to you. It is integrity that mandates a flight review be a genuine review, and not just a short hop to a nearby airport for lunch and back. It is integrity that drives a "do as I do" mentality, understanding that the flight instructor is a role model for the primary flight student, and that every observed action will most likely be modeled by the client.

And it is integrity that mandates a high level of situational awareness. This means that the instructor is not only aware of the client's wants and needs, but is constantly aware of, and diligent in managing, the risks of flight. An instructor who is truly effective in this area is teaching the elements of risk management (at a level that the client can understand) right from the very first lesson.

Communication is another quality integral to being a proficient aviation educator. Understanding that communication is a sharing of information — a two-way endeavor and not just a one-sided lecture — is vital to success both for instructor and client. You need to have (or develop) the knowledge and

skills to communicate in a variety of fashions, including non-verbal, and to recognize that effective

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communication can be highly dependent upon the situation at hand. A good educator must be able to teach with regard to the myriad learning styles, preferences, and experiences that clients bring to the table. A flight instructor must also learn that proactive communication is essential, as is the ability to deliver critical messages in a way that does not demean, demoralize, or demotivate.

Continuing Education is another item on my list of "right stuff" qualities for the aviation educator. It very quickly becomes evident to anyone who starts to teach that the true learning only begins once the teaching starts... *and it never ends*. After providing more than 10,300 hours of flight instruction, I can truly say that part of the excitement of my job is that I can look forward to learning more on virtually each and every encounter with a client. It is critically

important that the concept of continuing education be instilled not only in the neophyte instructor, but even more importantly in the earliest hours of a student pilot's engagement with aviation. The aviation educator must inculcate the mentality and instill the habit of continuing education into every client, leading them to understand that training doesn't end at the conclusion of regulatory minimum requirements. Rather, lifelong learning is a core part of being a pilot. If we succeed in this area, then we will have gone an immeasurable way toward reducing the GA accident rate.

Mentoring is an important element of continuing education. How nice (and how beneficial) it would be if every beginning flight instructor had a mentor to consult for advice and counseling. It is interesting and noteworthy (but not in a good way) that the United States is one of the few countries, if not the only country, where a low-time CFI is granted the authority to recommend a pilot for a certificate or rating. Most other countries mandate an apprentice period for low-time instructors, much as air carriers do for new hires and new captains, as a way of ensuring that continuing education occurs and develops experience. I strongly believe it would be advantageous if we in the United States voluntarily adopted this mentality.

It's Worth It

So, you'd like to be a flight instructor? Yes, it can be daunting. Yes, it requires high levels of responsibility, respect, integrity, communication and continuing education. Yes, it means that you will be working in environments that at times are less than conducive to teaching/learning. But it also means that you will be fulfilling one of the most critical roles in aviation — that of creating safe pilots. It means that you will be gaining the respect and friendship of those you teach. It means that you will be part and parcel of the sustenance of aviation as we know it. And if you are doing it right, it means that at the end of the day you will have a marvelous sense of satisfaction in knowing that your job is the most important of all those to be had in aviation! 

Doug Stewart is the 2004 National CFI of the Year, a Master CFI and a DPE. He operates DSFI, Inc. (www.dsflight.com) based at the Columbia County Airport (K1B1), and he serves as Executive Director of the Society for Aviation and Flight Educators (SAFE).